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**Grading for Learning Project**

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**Rationale**

For years student grades have been determined using a traditional model involving a variety of assignments, activities and behaviors. If a student was well behaved in class, participated in discussions, and turned assignments in on time he would earn an acceptable grade. Up until two years ago our high school was grading in this way. Students’ grades included things like extra credit, attendance, loss of points for being tardy, and up to 50% off for late work. In the summer of 2011, a group of teaching staff attended a Professional Learning Community Conference in Minneapolis, MN. At that conference we were introduced to best practices in grading based on research. As a result, many of our school practices were changed. First, a professional learning team (PLT) was formed, met, and created a mission, vision, values, and goals document for our high school. This set a clear guide for where we want to spend time on professional development and focus within our building. Once consensus was reached on the mission, vision, values and goals document, a grading PLT was formed to research best practices in grading and learning. This group developed a grading policy which all teaching staff use. Some of the changes included using formative and summative terminology in the classroom with students, not penalizing work turned in late, not using extra credit, and allowing students to reassess on assessments. The staff also agreed to change the weighting of homework to not be more than 30% of a student’s grade. Many staff members are currently applying homework as only 10% of the grade (O’Connor 2009). This was a huge change for everyone to embrace and the road has not been easy.

Once the mission, vision, values and goals document was completed, I coordinated with the high school principal and superintendent to take on an active leadership role in the development of course/grade level learning targets K-12. Along with the development of learning targets, I researched standards-based grading and implemented the 0-4 scale in my classroom and trained staff in the evidence for standards-based grading at the secondary level. I also took on the lead role facilitating the Grading Policy Professional Learning Team (PLT). This collaborative process has been a way to involve staff in reading relevant research in order to reflect on the grading changes and begin implementing standards-based grading themselves. All of these initiatives have reinforced the most critical component in education – an increase in student learning.

**Competencies Met/Supporting Research**

Quality administrative leadership and student learning go hand in hand; one cannot exist without the other. This simple statement forms the foundation of my first discussion, but it brings a couple of bigger questions to mind – How do you define a high quality school and how does an administrator impact school success? This project on grading and learning began during the summer of 2012. Throughout my learning, I have discovered that having a vision which includes goals, principles, and expectations is the first step toward setting the stage as a strong administrative leader. According to the book, “*What Every Principal Should Know about Cultural Leadership*,” Jeffrey Glanz describes the importance of a principal developing a clear vision because “without a vision there is no direction or hope for the future.” Every school has a different cultural, social, political, and economic story to tell. I believe the vision needs to be agreed upon by all with a vested interest in the school community including administration, teachers, support staff, students, families, and the community as a whole. It also needs to embody learning standards as they relate to student achievement, teacher expectations, and be the guide that steers the decision making within the school district (Wisconsin DPI, 2009). The vision also needs to reflect on personal development and social responsibility for all students. **(*Leadership:* 1 servant, moral, collaborative; 2 organization and vision; 5 change process; 6 integrity, ethics, fairness ; 7 safe, effective environment; 9 conflict resolution models; *Decision-Making*: 3 consensus; 5 long range strategic plans; 6 problem solving strategies; 7 fairness and ethics)**

The basis for the work done on the grading and learning project is reflected in our high school mission, vision, values and goals document. As a member of the professional learning team that developed this document, it is a constant guide in our decision-making and the foundation of all we do in our high school. The mission, vision, and value statements generated by the team and agreed by all high school staff are as follows:

**CWHS Mission Statement**

* Chetek-Weyerhaeuser High School guarantees that students will learn and perform at high levels by engaging in a wide variety of rigorous courses and high quality extra-curricular activities.

**CWHS Vision Statement**

* Chetek-Weyerhaeuser High School will become the highest performing high school in the state.

**CWHS Value Statements**

* Relationships - We take care of ourselves and each other
* Rigor – We work hard
* Ethics – We do what is right
* Safety – We provide a safe environment for students and staff
* Responsibility – We take ownership of our actions and learning
* Wellness – We pursue personal health and happiness

Since beginning my project on the impact of grades on learning, I have been able to reflect on the path our school has taken and see the difference this makes on the forward progress and success of a school. When the vision and mission have a focus on student learning and achievement, it will inherently drive the entire school and community to focus on what’s best for students. Ultimately, the goal for all students is to find success while in high school in order to offer them a variety of options in planning for their future. When a student finds success in learning, it opens a whole new world they may have never even thought possible*. (****Advanced Program Planning:* 1 k-12 whole curriculum; 2 elementary, middle, high school curriculum; 3 director of instruction role; 4 making curr decisions. *Learner Centered Instructional Leadership:* 2 curriculum development; 3 supervision and evaluation; 8 communication vision, mission; 9 long range strategic plans)**

As reflected in our vision, we believe that ALL students can learn at high levels and find success in school. What I have discovered about learning is the process is not one size fits all. This individualized or differentiated approach will allow for flexibility in learning and provide strengths based approach to instruction in the classroom. As education moves closer to individualizing instruction by using student’s strengths, it will be more and more important to systematically develop clear learning targets and align with academic standards and benchmarks. This guarantees the curriculum is rigorous and that students all learn at high levels. A good administrative leader will communicate this to the staff, students, and the community as a whole. At the same time, the staff needs to develop quality assessments that measure student achievement, while also meeting the needs of diverse learners (Wisconsin DPI, 2009). The data gained from these assessments needs to be communicated to all stakeholders in an efficient timeline following the vision of the school. By ensuring effective management of the school, its operations, and resources to provide a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment a true leader emerges. **(*Leadership:* 7 fairness and ethics; 8 change process. *Curriculum and Instruction:* 3 standards; 4 planning and development; 5 implementation; 7 research best practices. *Administration of Curriculum:* 1 supervision. *Learner Centered Leadership:*  1 school culture, climate; 2 curriculum development; 3 supervision, evaluation; 8 communicate vision, mission; 9 long range strategic plans)**

I have been able to move students and staff in the direction of this learning through curriculum work using the professional learning community model (PLC) first introduced to me in 2011 at the Professional Learning Community conference in Minneapolis, MN. Our staff had tried a variety of different strategies to track and record curriculum. The problem was that no one was using it on a regular basis and keeping it up-to-date. We had binders on shelves that were never opened and unit plans typed into programs that once completed were forgotten. As a member of our K-12 curriculum facilitator committee, I took the initiative to research best practices in curriculum design and alignment. After reading from *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work* by Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker and Thomas Many, *How to Grade for Learning* by Ken O’Connor, *Transforming Classroom Grading* by Robert Marzano and *Classroom Assessment and Grading that Work* by Robert Marzano I was able to clearly see the need to answer the first essential PLC question: What do we expect our students to learn? (Dufour and Eaker 1998). To me this meant developing grade level/course learning targets to clearly communicate the content of curriculum in our classrooms. Each learning outcome or target would be connected to a standard and from this we could see gaps/overlaps both horizontally and vertically within our school. Through several meetings with my high school principal and the superintendent, we were moving forward. It was at this same time that the mission, vision, values, and goals document was created. We now had a vision focused on achieving at high levels and a curriculum project K-12 to communicate the content of the learning within our school district. **(*Leadership:* 1 servant, moral, collaborative; 6 integrity, ethics, fairness; 9 effective communication. *Decision-Making:*  6 problem solving strategies; 8 change process. *Human Resources:* 3 staff development programs. *Curriculum/Instruction:* 3 standards; 4 planning and development; 5 implementation; 6 continuous assessment; 7 research: best practices)**

Once a learning target template was created and modeled, professional development time was given to all staff to complete learning targets. A thorough understanding of Bloom’s taxonomy was also important to this process because staff used this in creating courses/content targets. I met with departments and grade levels to review learning targets, gained approval, and shared with students and parents. Currently, the learning targets are shared in courses and used to communicate what we want students to know and be able to do. As a principal, I can use this documentation when walking into a classroom, know exactly what students should be learning, and provide immediate feedback to teachers as to whether the needs of the students are being met. It is also important to mention the importance of increasing literacy in all content areas. The next step in the process is the second PLC question: How will we know if they are learning? (Dufour and Eaker, 1998). Part of answering this question is movement toward standards-based grading and research-based best practices in grading/assessment building. I successfully implemented both of these within my classroom, provided professional development to staff, and am excited to see the work done this year propel our school forward as innovative leaders in education today. Throughout the research and work on grading I was introduced to standards-based (competency) grading practices. It seemed like a too much for our school to change grading policy and move to standards-based all in two years. I volunteered to pilot the implementation of standards-based grading and was subsequently given extra time in my schedule to work on implementing a standards-based grading initiative. Standards-based grading involves measuring students’ grades based on clearly defined learning targets (Scriffiny 2008). Since the learning target documentation was completed and aligned to the standards, using them in the classroom was the next logical step. ***(Principalship*: 2 manager vs leader; 4 supervision, evaluation of personnel**. ***Advanced Program Planning Curriculum*: 3 director of instruction role; 6 evaluation of curriculum. *Curriculum/Instruction:* 3 standards; 4 planning and development; 5 implementation; 6 continuous assessment; 7 research: best practices)**

I also researched how to assess students using a 0-4 point scale and grade their formative and summative work using that scale. In this system you do not average grades or use points/percents. Students’ grades are based on their proficiency, not averaging ongoing coursework. All assessments were built on levels 2, 3, and 4. (Marzano 2006). A score of 3 is proficient and the goal for each student on each learning target within the unit of study. Students could reassess on assessments and clearly see what they did and didn’t know. I was able to use a pure standards-based grade book my first trimester and it was successful. However, we still live in a society where percents and grade point averages rule. This forced me to move back into the traditional grade book and convert the four point scale into a letter grade/percent. Although the move hasn’t gone perfectly, it is working well for the most part. **(*Advanced Program Planning:* 3 director of instruction role; 6 evaluation of curriculum; *Implementing Standards-Based Education:* 5 supervision of instruction; 6 assessment relative to standards; 8 in servicing standards-based ed; 9 standards-based classroom)**

With mostly success in using this new method of grading, it was time to share the research and best practice with a small group of staff by leading the grading policy PLT. There were seven practices which guided the work and this is where I began. Practice 1: Use summative assessment to frame meaningful learning targets, Practice 2: Show criteria and models in advance, Practice 3: Assess before teaching, Practice 4: Offer appropriate choices as assessment options, Practice 5: Provide feedback early and often, Practice 6: Encourage self-assessment and goal setting, and Practice 7: Allow new evidence of achievement to replace old evidence (McTighe and O’Connor 2005). **(Advanced Program Planning: 3 director of instruction role. *Implementing Standards-Based Education:* 8 inservicing on standards-based ed; 9 standards-based classroom)**

The above work will impact student learning because it is the foundation of understanding in everything taught within our classrooms each day. Having a viable and guaranteed curriculum and individualizing it as much as possible will move student achievement results higher. There is a multitude of experts working in educational psychology and pioneering research-based best practices in learning. These individuals continue to pave the way toward understanding how to prepare students for college and career readiness for the 21st century and beyond. . **(*Leadership:* 2 organization vision; 3 context for leadership)**

**So What?**

As we move forward in education, the pace at which things change will not slow down. It’s an exciting time in education because professionals in education are having conversations about how to best measure student achievement. Administrators are more accountable than ever before, while the focus on student learning and academic achievement has not waned. The process starts with engaging in designing and communicating a clear vision with support from all stakeholders. Once the course is set, the key is to engage in relevant professional development centered on learning

Although resistance toward changes in grading practices are likely, the key to moving forward is staying focused on what’s best for students and their learning. Standards-based grading will move us in the right direction toward by having clear conversations regarding the main purpose of grades in the role of learning. I see that both instructional and systemic leadership need to provide adequate time and resources to allows teachers the ability to make the required changes. Along with the change to standards-based grading, there is a large focus on writing across content areas, reading informational text, research, problem solving, focus, and a connection to real-world applications. It is the responsibility of all content areas to take ownership in this process, be provided with a clear professional development plan, and time to implement the necessary changes. The staff also needs to have “buy in” on the process, it will only be successful if teachers see value in the change.

I am excited to be a part of the movement towards a true standards-based system where student learning is not based on points in a system/scale that doesn’t make sense. Learning, instead, will be measured based on what a student knows and can do and will change as their learning changes. That is what educators need to focus on and what really matters in the classroom. I look forward to the challenge and opportunity to lead staff and educational professionals in how to best meet the needs of students today.

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